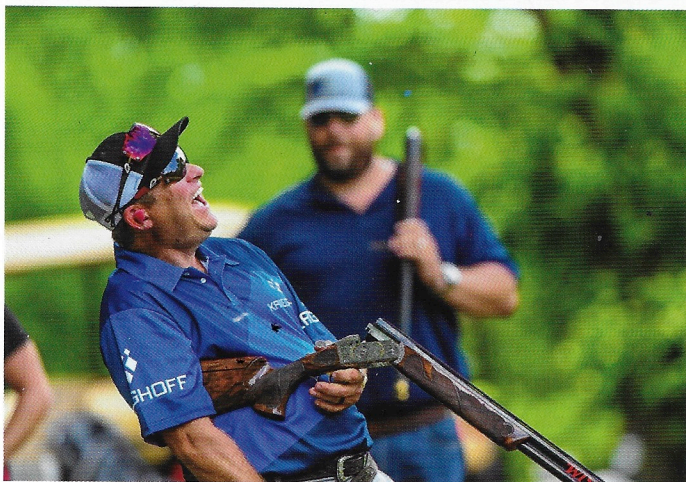


# YOUR SCORE Doesn't Define YOU

BY JOHN D. SHIMA  
SAN ANTONIO, TX

In his Forward to Trevor Moawad's powerful book, *It Takes Whatever It Takes*, the Seattle Seahawks' sensational quarterback Russell Wilson emphasized how important thinking neutrally was to achieving peak performances in big games. Although it's obvious that thinking negatively is always detrimental to an athlete's performance, Wilson remarked that thinking positively is almost impossible when your team is down 16-0 in the NFC Championship game. Whereas negative and positive thinking are the ego's attempts to distort the truth, neutral thinking allows the athlete to accept the truth of his or her present situation. In meditative terms, neutral thinking is being truthful in the moment, and then responding accordingly.



## Thinking Neutrally

Neutral thinking requires a clay target shooter to become emotionally detached from present circumstances so he or she can clearly understand what can be controlled, and what cannot be controlled. Although it seems obvious that shooters should be able to control their thinking and their behaviors, competition often rouses emotions that prevent them from properly interpreting their thoughts, and effectively managing their reactions to those thoughts.

Thinking neutrally requires a shooter to look inward to expose his or her habitual thinking patterns. Oftentimes these

habitual thinking patterns are self-defeating. Developing self-awareness is often a challenge because shooters fear that exposing their inner weaknesses will make them vulnerable and further erode their self-confidence.

According to Brenè Brown, a professor at the University of Houston and avid clay target shooter, the courage to change one's sense of self-worth and a perfectionist approach to life is born out of vulnerability. Brown's study of perfectionism awakened her to the difference between what we want to be true, and what is true, which makes us feel vulnerable in anxiety producing circumstances.

In her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brown stated that shame is a formidable emotion that prompts our self-talk to say things like: “you’re not good enough,” and “who do you think you are?” The primary shame trigger is comparison. Judging oneself relative to others erodes a person’s self-worth and is a barrier to thinking neutrally.

Based upon research and more than three decades as a professional shooting instructor, I have concluded that the elements of thinking neutrally include:

**Acceptance** – Thinking neutrally enables shooters to see who they are, and how they shoot, in the context of what is true rather than the image of what they want to be true. Acceptance of what is true takes courage because it requires shooters to let go of the belief that achieving a specific shooting goal will change who they are, and influence how their shooting ability is perceived by themselves and others.

**Truthfulness** – Thinking neutrally reveals a simple truth that each shot at a clay target has a

history and a life of its own. Although the outcome of the shot is important to the shooter, and the outcome matters to the score in the round, the results of previous shots have nothing to do with what happens to the next target.

**Liberating** – Acceptance of what is, instead of judging what happened, is a liberating aspect of neutral thinking. Negative self-talk is bad, and positive self-talk is better, but Moawad believes all self-talk is basically delusional and prevents athletes from clearly perceiving reality in the moment.

**Reality** – A shooter’s perception of reality is usually distorted by the priority the subconscious mind naturally gives to past events. Since humans are hard-wired to remember negative experiences, which automatically program their primitive survival habits, clay target shooters must learn to re-wire this subconscious mechanism by quieting their mind and settling into the present moment. Eckhart Tolle described the present as being “in the now.” Reality has no past and no future, it is just - now.

## Shooting Naturally

I introduced the concept of shooting naturally in my first book, *The Moment of Truth*, with a narrative about a friend of mine who trained American quarter horses. He told me that horses have the natural ability to walk, trot, gallop, stop, turn around, and jump. These are all the skills that a horse uses to perform in competition. Therefore, the goal of training is to teach the horse to perform its natural abilities in response to specific cues initiated by the rider. Although a horse may be born with these skills, it will not respond appropriately with a rider on its back without training, discipline, and trust.

Likewise, humans are born with the natural ability to detect a moving object, to track it visually, to identify what it is, to determine whether it is a potential threat, and then react to it. This “fight or flight reflex” is hardwired into the primitive brain of all humans. The visual detection, acquisition, and tracking of a moving object occurs automatically. However, consistent reactions to a specific moving object, such as a clay target, requires specifically programmed habits via deliberate conditioning.

The manner in which every human’s innate reflexes, and their ability to point at moving objects, became the central premise of the Shima Shooting Method<sup>SM</sup>. What a clay target shooter sees, and how he or she reacts to the perceived image, is strongly influenced by their current emotional state, their underlying need for self-confidence, and their capacity to rely on unconditional trust.

John Wheeler, author of, *Awaken to Your Natural State* wrote, “The natural state just

observes; it doesn’t think, conceptualize, or interpret, it is just present and aware.” Settling the eyes into expanded soft focus at the eye hold, before calling for the release of the clay target, quiets the mind and allows the shooter to slip into a state of awareness, which is a state of visual alertness or readiness, enabling a shooter to detect movement of a clay target, and focus on it continuously.

My shooting method is based upon the premise that individuals have the natural ability to point a shotgun correctly to break moving clay targets. However, just as the horse trainer must teach his or her horse to overcome the emotional distress of performing its natural skills, while tolerating a predator riding on its back, I must help individuals overcome their emotional attachment to the outcome of each shot so they can execute their natural ability to point a shotgun. I outlined this process in my book in three sections: the vision to see, the faith to believe, and the courage to do.

## Vision to See

Proficiency in the clay target sports is more about visual discipline than shooting skill. Human infants develop the ability to reach for things they want, or to point toward moving objects that attract their attention. Kids intuitively reach outwards to catch an incoming ball or swing a bat to hit it. The reflexes for hand-eye coordination are pre-wired. In his book, *Your Mind is What Your Brain Does for a Living* author Steven Jay Fogel stated, “We are designed to react to everything; the only choice we have is about how we react.”

If you ask any person to stand on Station 4 on a skeet field and





tell them to watch the clay target travel from the window, over the center stake, out to the boundary stake they can do it without any instruction. However, when a shooter stands on Station 4 with a loaded shotgun and a desire to prove that he or she is competent to break the clay target, the simple task of watching the target is overwhelmed by the desire to hit the target. I constantly remind my clients who are struggling to improve their shooting proficiency that their desire to break the target must be overridden by the intention to watch the target continuously until it breaks.

## Faith to Believe

In the context of shooting clay targets, confidence and trust are related, but they are not the same. Confidence relates to a feeling of self-assurance that arises from a shooter's appreciation of his or her ability to break the next clay target. Trust relates to a belief in the reliability or strength of someone or something. Confidence is conditional; trust is unconditional.

In his book, *The Confidence*

*Gap: From Fear to Freedom*, author Russ Harris encourages individuals with low self-confidence and anxiety to acknowledge the difference between their skills and the ability to perform them under pressure, and then form a new and wiser relationship to close the gap. According to Harris' research, mindfulness, being in the present, helps people deal with self-defeating thoughts and painful emotions.

Careful shooters rely on their confidence to watch the clay target and the end of the muzzle simultaneously (blended focus) to engage the target and hit it. Mindful shooters rely on confidence to watch the target continuously (absolute focus) and trust the automaticity of the pre-planned move (shooting reflex) to engage the target and break it. The faith to believe in the efficiency and effectiveness of the shooting reflex is the hallmark of the Shima Shooting Method<sup>SM</sup>.

## Courage to Do

Brenè Brown stated that the

courage to change one's sense of self-worth and a perfectionist approach to life is born out of vulnerability. The inability of a shooter to introspectively confront the deep-seated emotional needs that reinforce his or her false assumptions that feed the intense desire to break clay targets allow it to be a constant barrier that will interfere with the realization of his or her true shooting potential.

In their book, *Immunity to Change*, psychologists Kegan and Lahey stated that resistance to change is another innate mechanism designed to protect humans from the psychological trauma that sudden changes can precipitate. Therefore, the ego strives to defend its fear of failure, because it is metaphorically essential to its emotional survival. In reality, a clay target is just a clay target. It poses no actual threat to a shooter's physical well-being.

It is most likely the shame they associate with the failure to break a clay target that instills fear in the hearts and minds of many shooters who aspire to be competitive. According to Kegan and Lahey, the fear of failure is the

result of a false assumption that a shooter's ego holds to be true. It requires vulnerability to expose the false assumption that failure to break a clay target is shameful, and to acknowledge that the tightly held assumption is false.

Shame is an intensely painful experience. It has the power to convince us that the voice in our head is speaking the truth, and we are afraid other people will discover it, too. I constantly remind my clients, "Your score does not define you." I know they understand the phrase intellectually, but I still see many of them hang their heads in shame after missing a target, especially when they are close to a 25 straight. It is a challenge for the most competitive shooters to learn how to miss clay targets shamelessly. It is challenging because it takes courage to do it.

## Missing Shamelessly

Thomas Scheff, a professor of sociology at UC Santa Barbara said, "Shame is the most obstructed and hidden emotion, and therefore the most

IF YOUR DOG DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOUR SCORE,  
NEITHER SHOULD YOU



destructive." Shooters who allow shame to define them can learn to understand why they attach intense feelings to disappointing outcomes, and move past the shame that underlies their unresolved issues by using these five steps:

#### 1. Acknowledge It –

When individuals attempt to hide their shame under a blanket of successes, it always has the potential to awaken and define them. Brown explained in her book *Daring Greatly*, "When we hide the story [underlying our shame], we forever stay the subject of the story. If we own the story, we get to narrate the ending." You must acknowledge the feeling of shame that is attached to a missed target to effectively manage it.

#### 2. Untangle It –

Researchers differentiate shame and guilt. Shame means, "I am bad." Guilt means, "I did something bad." So, when that voice in your head scolds you by saying, "You should be ashamed of yourself," it should be saying, "You should feel guilty for missing that easy

target because ..." When we are embarrassed about missing a target it doesn't erode our self-worth the way shame does because we know everyone misses targets. The issue isn't about you; it's about your behavior. You can feel guilty for not concentrating enough during your pre-shot routine, or you could be embarrassed for not focusing hard on the target in the break zone. Those are shooting habits – behaviors that require more training. They do not define who you really are.

#### 3. Unlink It –

General Colin Powell said, "There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure." If learning from failure is an option for a man who sends soldiers into combat, then a shooter can certainly learn something from the failure to break a clay target. Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player of all-time, didn't make every clutch shot to win every game. Yet, Jordan admitted, "I've failed over and over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed." When shooters

unlink how they shoot from who they are, the shooters' self-worth is no longer on the pad when they call for a target, so they can just shoot naturally.

#### 4. Disconnect It –

According to Brenè Brown our insecurities about who we should be trigger a feeling that defaults to shame when our performance exposes who we really are. Rather than responding to the shame-trigger, a shooter must disconnect the unrealistic notion of who they should be to the outcome of each shot.

#### 5. Support It –

The essence of shame is the fear of disconnection. Shooters who struggle with shame when they "fail" must surround themselves with friends and family who support who they really are, rather than aspire to maintain relationships with a group of shooters based upon a notion of who they believe they need to be. Shooters who acknowledge and accept who they really are will insulate themselves from the performance, status, and social anxieties that are connected to shame.

## Accept Yourself

Thinking neutrally enables clay target shooters to embrace the present and become emotionally detached from past experiences and potentially adverse future outcomes, so they can enhance their awareness in the moment and focus on the task at hand - watch each target until it breaks. Thinking neutrally promotes an individual's ability to accept who they really are. Removing shame from the game will enhance every shooter's ability to shoot naturally

and enhance their enjoyment of playing the game regardless of the score. ■

*John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet Champion and was high average in 12 gauge for two years. John is the leading authority on detection of visual deceptions and prescribing appropriate visual training to unleash the power of reality for clay target shooters. For more information about the Shima Shooting Method<sup>SM</sup>, the Clinic Schedule, his new Shima Shooting Experience<sup>SM</sup>, or to arrange a Private Consultation, contact John via email at [john@johnshima.com](mailto:john@johnshima.com). To view previous articles, go to [johnshima.com/publications](http://johnshima.com/publications)*

